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New spirit in old Savannah — a city with plans

Chester Smolski

SAVANNAH, Ga. — A large downtown is normally characterized by tall buildings because demand in this most accessible location is strong, with intensive use of the land being the result. Approaching a city, as one looks off in the distance at the cityscape, one is able to quickly locate the central business district as, for example, one drives south on Route 146 toward Providence. Such is not the case in this serene and lovely, port city of Georgia.

In Savannah, the twin steeples of the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, among others, and the few scattered 12 to 15 story buildings than can be counted on the fingers of one hand, are the only structures puncturing the sky. It is this general lack of tall building concentration which helps explain the human and intimate scale of this historic city, now home for 119,000 residents.

Situated on a 40-foot high bluff overlooking the Savannah River to the north, this first planned city of America is the oldest city in Georgia also. When James

Oglethorpe, member of Parliament and active prison reformer, brought his 114 settlers to this site in 1733, he drew the plans and laid the foundations for a city which has maintained its character through two major fires, occupation by General Sherman and, most recently, urban renewal.

Among the many reminders of the rich legacy of this city are the monument to General Nathanael Greene, Rhode Island born Revolutionary War hero buried here, and the house of Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the Girl Scouts in 1912. Most significant of note, is the Savannah Historic District, the largest historic district in the central city of any major city in the United States. It was designated as a registered National Historic Landmark in 1967. This Historic District encompasses the original two and one-half square mile city laid out by Oglethorpe. His noteworthy design made extensive use of public squares, 24 in number, arranged in a symmetrical pattern, two blocks apart, both east and west and north and south. Finished more than 100 years after the original Johnson Square was built, the squares were planted with oaks and magnolias which grew to provide shade, aroma and beauty for these tranquil havens. Carl Feiss, noted architect, claims that "the square by frequent repetition

becomes an integral part of the street pattern and creates a series of rhythmically placed openings which give a wonderful sense of space in a solidly built townscape."

Delightful as the squares were, the original city with its rich collection of 18th and 19th century old houses became badly deteriorated, as were the squares. Yet these same squares provided the impetus for a revived Savannah.

To facilitate the automobile, three of the squares were cut for a roadway and the fourth which contained a farmers' market sprouted a parking garage. And all the while the lovely old buildings concentrated in this area were being abandoned, vandalized or destroyed.

Greatly dismayed over destruction of the farmers' market building, Mrs. Anna Hunter and the "nine little old ladies in tennis shoes" banded together to form the Historic Savannah Foundation in the mid-1950s. First they saved the Davenport House, a fine Georgian structure, only minutes before a wrecker's ball was poised to knock it down for another parking lot.

From this small beginning, fresh interest focused on the architecturally rich downtown. Soon the Foundation was flourishing with increased membership and vigorous leadership. Using criteria established by

the College Hill study, done by the Providence City Planning Commission in 1959, a survey of the original city done by the Foundation turned up more than 1100 buildings of architectural and historical significance. The Foundation's buying some of these abandoned houses, restoring and selling them, served as catalyst for the subsequent revitalization of the whole district.

Today more than 900 buildings bear witness to the initial work of the Foundation and the many private endeavors to restore these lovely old buildings. Downtown Savannah is now the "in" place to live although the houses quadrupled-in-value prevent many from doing so.

Looking at the area today, it is difficult to imagine that less than 15 years ago many of these older houses were abandoned and the main street of this mixed-use downtown was dying. As one leader stated, "Deterioration was eating at the heart of the inner city. . . . We didn't have a hotel downtown and it was dirty. I used to drive around the downtown area to avoid having to see the unpleasant place."

Now there is a new Hilton hotel in the district, a new Civic Center, a new motel complex to the west of the district, and a recently completed \$8 million river front park urban renewal project. The park follows the cobblestone streets here, and on the other side of the street are the newly renovated warehouses which contain restaurants, shops and evening entertainment on the lower level facing the river and offices at the higher levels facing the downtown.

The biggest change is a new spirit in old Savannah. This new spirit manifests itself in a newly refurbished Broughton Street, major retail street, where the shopkeepers assessed themselves \$230 per front foot to do the block right, a nearly \$1 million project. The city provided some money to get the job started and removed parking meters on the street. There are now more than 100 free parking spaces on the main street downtown. Although some shops on the west end of Broughton are empty, the two major department stores recorded their best sales ever last year.

The new spirit also inspired creation of another historic district in 1974, immediately to the south of the original city. In this Victorian District, the newly formed Savannah Neighborhood Action Project is buying and restoring some of the 1200 houses. Using CETA funds to train people in construction, plus HUD funds for 312 loans and Section 8 housing, and NEQ funds for administrative costs, the project has 64 housing units under way. Unlike the first district, they are designed to keep low income and minority people here — but in better and basically restored, architecturally significant houses.

Savannah is restoring and revitalizing the best of its rich history. As Lewis Mumford states, "In a city, time becomes visible", and nowhere is that more evident than in Georgia's first city.

Chester E. Smolski, Director of Urban Studies at Rhode Island College, is touring several southern cities.